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THE THEME-CONCEPT UNIT IN LITERATURE.
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A SUGGESTED UNIT FRAMEWORK WAS DEVELOPED AS A METHOD OF TEACHING SEVENTH-GRADE LITERATURE AT EUCLID CENTRAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN EUCLID, OHIO. THE UNIT WAS DIVIDED INTO SIX MAJOR SECTIONS--(1) DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT, (2) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF A TEACHER, (3) REVISION OF THE CONCEPT, (4) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT BY SMALL GROUPS OF STUDENTS WITHOUT DIRECT TEACHER SUPERVISION, (5) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT BY INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS WITHOUT TEACHER GUIDANCE, AND (6) COMPOSITION. EACH SECTION WAS DISCUSSED WITH RESPECT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MAJOR CONCEPTS AND THE APPLICATION OF THOSE CONCEPTS TO SEVERAL LITERARY WORKS. (RB)

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The Theme-Concept Unit in Literature

Much has been written about the thematic unit for use in English classes. Reading and literature anthologies for English in both junior and senior high are frequently built around themes. The professional journals are jammed with articles on thematic curricula and on specific unit suggestions. There seems to be less concern over whether the unit presents any concept which is basic to the understanding of literature and which therefore will be of value in the future reading of the student. Even when there is such a concern, there frequently is no specific provision in the unit structure for insuring that the student becomes independent in his use of the concept.

What, then, is the value of the thematic unit? The proponents of teaching the theme argue that there are two primary values: integration and motivation. They argue that students enjoy working with a theme and that the use of such a theme permits the integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking activites as well as the integration of ideas with vicarious and personal experiences. Building work around a central theme allows the student to explore the theme at his own level of interest, experience, and ability and, at the same time to make significant contributions to the class work.

Certainly these are convincing arguments, but questions still remain. Does the unit have a structure apart from the theme? Does the unit treat problems which will arise in the student's later reading and thereby provide a basis for making inferences when the problems do arise? Does the unit systematically develop skill in reading, especially in making inferences involving the theme or concept? If the answers to these questions are negative, then the thematic unit is little better than the older grouping of short stories, poems, and plays, or than a simple linear movement from one work to another with little or no connection of any kind between the works.

The program at Euclid Central Junior High School is based on two premises. Seventh grade students are capable of handling simple concepts, of making use of these concepts in their reading, and of using one concept as a foundation for building another. Therefore, learning in literature can be cumulative. One of the primary objectives of teachers of English is to help students to the skills and concepts which will enable them to read a poem or novel with comprehension. Therefore, they must somehow structure the learning situation so that the student develops fruitful concepts from his experience or his reading, integrates them, expands them, redefines them, and applies them creatively in a number of reading situations. The following suggested unit framework is a method of teaching the reading of literature wich insures both the development

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of fruitful concepts and the application of these concepts to several works.

The unit can be divided into six major sections: (1) development of the concept, (2) application of the concept under the guidance of the teacher, (3) revision of the concept, (4) application of the concept by small groups of students without direct teacher supervision, (5) application of the concept by individual students without teacher guidance, and (6) composition.

1) DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OR THEME: The theme and concepts are of central importance to the unit. The theme must be selected for its potential interest to the student, for its productivity, and for its importance to the understanding of literature.

Student interest in the theme will necessarily depend upon several factors: the student, the theme, the handling of the unit in class, and the materials used in the unit. If the theme and/or concept of the unit is too abstract or complex, the student's interest will lag, out of frustration. The reluctant student must have materials that are already of interest to him, while the bright student becomes interested in a wide variety of materials. While the slow, average student may be frustrated in dealing with abstractions for which the concrete examples are unfamiliar, the bright student characteristically likes to play with and argue about abstractions. The extent of student involvement will account for much of the degree of interest in the unit. If students do some of the planning, develop the concepts, and apply the concepts to materials themselves, if there is a maximum of student participation and a judicious use of teacher direction, student interest is likely to remain high.

The second criterion, a productive theme or concept, is one which continues to reveal new aspects and ramifications of itself as well as those things to which it is applied. The theme of survival, for instance, is productive in that it involves a multitude of phases and can be applied to a number of situations. A theme such as railroads is less productive unless it could be extended to include the effects of industrialization on modern man.

The third criterion is the importance of the theme to the understanding of literature. A theme such as "survival" which might examine the moral values of the characters and their reactions to critical situations will be of use in the understanding of literary characters and situations of conflict in general.

The concept or theme development may begin in serveral ways: from the student's own experience, from specially selected readings or from the research planned and executed by the student.

A unit dealing with the theme of courage might capitalize on the student's ideas and experience. A series of questions about the nature of courage or a series of problematic situations followed by questions can serve both as an introduction to the unit and as a stimulant for the formulation of an extended definition of courage. What is courage? When is a man courageous? Is he courageous only in the face of physical threats? Is he courageous if his heroism endangers the lives of other? When a few questions such as these

have been discussed, the students may wish to invent some problematic situations of their own and ask their classmates similar questions. If the discussion has been preceded by the writing of a definition, both teacher and students may now wish to revise it. If not, it is time to formulate the concept.

A more sophisticated unit such as tragedy almost necessarily has to begin with the reading either of selected plays or criticism. The teacher may begin by asking students what they think a tragedy is; but unless they have had previous experience with the genre, their answers will suggest tragedy only in its newspaper sense. At this point the teach may suggest that tragedy is also a literary form -- one of the most important in Western culture, and he may pose the problem, "What is tragedy?" Since literary criticism generally means little without some knowledge of the subject of the criticism, the student begins by reading some plays. The problem, "What is tragedy?" should always be before him, and he should consider each work read in connection with the others. By the time he has read four plays, he may begin to formulate a definition.

When the unit concepts are to be derived from reading, the techniques of comparison and contrast are of extreme importance and, in the instance of tragedy, should be used in examining the nature of the tragic hero, his character, his struggle, the plot action, the moral universe suggested by the author, the attitude of the author toward his subject, as well as other elements vital to tragedy. when all of these have been considered, the student is ready both to "lump" and to "split." He should make generalizations concerning tragedy but not without suggesting contrasts. If the process has been successful, then the student is ready to apply his formulation of tragedy to a work which is not so obviously a tragedy.

Some units may be initiated with student planning and library reading. For instance, in a unit on the literature of protest, the teacher may begin by suggesting that much has been written to protest poor social and economic conditions and their effects on people. The teacher may allow the class to decide how they wish to learn about such literature. The students may approach the problem by first reading articles which deal with problems such as slum areas, oppressive labor practices, the problem of segregation, and the causes of juvenile delinquency. After such reading they are much better prepared to approach fiction dealing with these problems.

2) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE TEACHER: After the concept has been introduced and tentatively formulated, the problem for the student is to explore a specific literary work in terms of the concept. In a unit dealing with courage, for instance, students might read a group of short stories in which the characters display various aspects of courage of lack of it in a wide variety of situations. Leo Tolstoy wrote a story called "The Raid" which he intended as a study of courage and in which he deals with the Platonic conception of courage. In this particular story various characters react in different ways in the same situation. Each displays a kind of courage of lack of it. The students can move from a story which analyzes courage to one in which

courage is important but which displays the traditional cliches in the author's approach. Further storeis or poems might be selected to demonstrate courage in situations which are not primarily physical: stories in which the conflict is moral, psychological, or intellectual. Careful examination of such stories will lead to reevaluation of the original definition developed by the students, since their definition, more than likely, involved only the conventional stereotypes of courage.

In a unit dealing with tragedy, the length of any one tragedy precludes the application of the concept to more than one or two works. The choice of a play or book which is not clearly tragic seems to be most productive because the student is placed in a position which forces him to evaluate through comparison and contrast. In examining a play such as The Emperor Jones, the student must consider problems such as the following: Is the play a tragedy? In what way is the play tragic? In what way is it not tragic? How does Jones differ from the classical tragic hero of Greek and Elizabethan tragedy? How have the concerns of the dramatist changed since Elizabethan times? What does the use of the falling plot action of tragedy for a hero like Jones reveal about the modern concepts of man of tragedy? In short, the students' thinking should focus on how meaning is revealed in the similarities and dissimilarities of form - form in a sense broad enough to include, in this case, the stature and character of the hero and the moral universe depicted.

In the unit dealing with the literature of protest, after reading explicit protests against various kinds of social ills, the student should be confronted with the problem of discovering how protest is conveyed in fiction or poetry. For instance, the students may be asked to analyze Upton Sinclair's The Jungle with regard to the causes and manifestations of social ills. The students should also examine both the explicit and implicit utopian situations in contrast to the explicitly described evil.

3) REVISION OF THE CONCEPT: Whatever the concept, it can be revised at this point or some other point in the unit, or the teacher and class may decide that no revision is necessary. The unit on courage leads naturally to revision. The definition of tragedy developed by the students can be revised in light of short essays written by established critics such as those in the Signet volume Eight Great Tragedies. The unit on the literature of protest probably demands the building of a second concept concerned with how a writer of fiction conveys his protest.

Explicit provision for revising does not imply that revision need take place only once. Ideally, revision should be a continual process and any concept which does not lend itself to continual growth and whose outer limits may be reached quickly and without effort is probably not suitable for a unit. Such limited concepts tend to stagnate and fail to offer either the teacher or the class fresh insights.

4) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT BY SMALL GROUPS: There are three significant reasons for analysis of material by small groups of students.

First, the division of the class into small groups reduces the

amount of assistance that can be offered by the teacher but increases the responsibility of the student. The student can no longer rely completely on the teacher, but at the same time, he is not cast completely adrift; he can still rely upon the assistance of his fellow students.

Second, the small group situation is highly motivational. The questions are asked, and the problems are raised by students who alone are responsible for answers and solutions. Nearly every student in a small group becomes involved in discussion, while in a teacher-led class discussion only a few students become actively involved. In a small group, many of the inhibitions to class response are released; there is no authority figure to criticize; only a few people can laugh; and a student is not likely to be overawed by those he considers his peers. In addition, of course, this technique breaks the monotony of the teacher-led class discussion.

Third, use of the small group enables the teacher to provide at least partially for differences in ability. It would be absurd to assume that it is possible to find material suited to the individual needs of every student in the class - to find, for instance, thirty poems on the same theme ranked in thirty gradations of difficulty. It is sometimes frustrating to attempt to find poems on four levels of difficulty when there is a concomitant need for the poems to have a particular common theme. The task, however, is not impossible. And the patient seeker who finds three or four poems, short stories, or books on levels suitable for his class will find that he is able to challenge the bright student without frustrating the slow. The teacher will also find that each student in the class will have opportunity for success working with material close to his own level.

There is no need to fear that the procedure of giving different material to different students will result in either chaos or failure to improve reading. Nor is there a difficulty becuase the teachers at one grade level will not know what the students at another level have read. In the first place, students rapidly become used to reading material other than what their friends read. In the second place, students can learn to read only by reading material which they can handle. If we give students material which is out of their range and which they cannot or will not read, we deprive them of an opportunity to read and to improve their skill. In the third place, although English teachers frequently say that it is necessary to know what the student has read in a previous grade and that it is best if all students have the same background, knowledge of the units and the approaches used at the preceding grade levels should be of great value to the teacher than a list or works which studetns have read in common.

In a unit like that on courage there is little problem in finding material of high quality at various levels of difficulty. Because a unit on tragedy, however, presents difficulty, such a unit should be developed only with the more sophisticated readers. Only the brightest students will have the ability to deal with the abstract concepts involved in this genre, and these students will also be - in most cases -- good readers. The students can easily move to the final phase of the unit - that of individual analysis - after group formulation of the

concept. A unit like that on social protest may offer an opportunity for analysis by small groups before the completion of the first major reading. For instance, while the discussion of a book such as The Jungle may be a whole class activity at first, the discussion can continue through small group work once the principles of analysis have been firmly established.

5) APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTS BY INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS: The final phase of the unit serves two very important functions. It provides for purposeful independent reading, and it serves as any evaluation of the unit. At this stage of the unit the teacher should have a large number of books or short works available. If there is sufficient material, every student may read a work which has special appeal for him and is suited to his reading ability.

The student of course should be able to analyze independenly the work he chooses, and his analysis should be in terms of the unit concepts he has heard discussed as well as any other ideas he has dealt with previously. Naturally if a student has never dealt with tragedy as an idea or genre, he should not be expected to include that idea in his analysis. But if, for instance, he is dealing with a tragedy and has already dealt with the ideas of courage and epic, he should bring both to bear in his analysis. If the teacher is aware of concepts developed in previous units, it is any easy matter to helpt the student relate them to new materials and ideas.

This final activity serves as an evaluation of the success of the unit. If the student's analysis consists of a plot summary and a few superficial comments on the courage of the protagonist, the unit has probably been a failure, at least for him. Naturally there should be different expectancies for different students. It is not necessary that every student do a penetrating and discriminating synthesis in his final analysis. We can expect great things from bright students, but we must accept the slow student's sincere efforts, however weak they may be. If the slow student can answer a questions such as "In what ways was Jack courageous?" and in answering can cite examples from the text, perhaps the teacher can ask no more of him.

If the students of average reading ability cannot apply the concepts satisfactorily, the teacher has a strong indication that he has failed somewhere. Perhaps the unit is too difficult for the class. Perhaps the teacher failed to motivate the students. Perhaps the specific reading materials were too difficult. Any number of things might have been at fault, and the teacher must revise the unit according to his analysis. But if the student understands the concepts, can formulate his own study questions in terms of them, and can analyze a work in reference to the concepts, then the unit may be judged successful.

6) COMPOSITION: Although discussed last, composition is not intended as a concluding activity. On the contrary, a unit constructed in the manner suggested offers a number of opportunities for composition and in certain places demands composition activities. Obviously, the bias of units constructed in this way emphasizes expository writing, but there are a number of opportunities for creative writing - from personal narrative and the short story to stylized verse forms and free verse.

The first phase of each unit presents an opportunity for teaching organization, development, coherence, and other processes and skills of expository writing. If the concept has been fully and logically developed in discussion and reading, the students will have an abundance of material for writing an extensive definition or analysis. The teacher and class together, for instance, can develop a skeletal outline for a composition defining courage. If the student is faced with making a general statement beginning "Courage is...," the teacher will probably have to teach the students techniques for completing the statement. The student must find a class to which courage belongs and differentiate courage from all other members of the class. This in itself is a difficult but worthwhile lesson. Once such a statement is drawn up, the student may develop his composition by using comparison, contrast, and examples. If the reading of the unit offers examples of stereotyped courage, courage of a physical or moral nature, and examples of both cowardice and brashness, the student will have a good deal of material on which to base his discriminations and from which to draw his examples.

A more complex topic such as tragedy naturally presents a more complex organizational problem. The student must learn how to introduce the varied aspects of his topic, how to elaborate upon each aspect, and how to hold all the aspects together to support the central thesis of the composition. Both the teaching and the execution of such organization are difficult, but the development of the concepts in the unit allows the student to give his main attention to writing and organizing effectively. At the same time, however, the student should be encouraged to develop the concept beyond the teacher-class discussion. He should feel free to bring his individual ideas and insights to bear on the topic.

Later in the unit the student will have a number of opportunities to write analyses in which he applies the unit concept to a particular work. He can be confronted with a problem solving situation such as "In what respects can The Emperor Jones be considered a tragedy?" In order to deal with the problem, the student must have the unit concept well in hand, he must read carefully and critically, and finally he must marshal and organize his ideas.

Opportunities for creative writing do not manifest themselves so readily as do those for expository writing. Still, such opportunities are available in every unit. Although we cannot ask students to write an original tragedy, they can - if they have had some work with satire-burlesque or parody tragic style or a particular tragedy.

The unit on courage may give rise to narrations of fictional or true incidents which involve moral or physical courage. The narration of the true incident is much easier for most studetns to complete successfully, becuase they have fewer problems in creation. The situation, characters, and setting are ready-made. The student can focus his attention on techniques of description and narration which are usually challenging enough. After writing true incidents, a class can use the best of the stories as models for fictional incidents. With these models of various plot patterns, the writing of fictional incidents becomes easier.

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A unit on the literature of protest may be conducive to the writing of explicit or implicit protestations against some aspect of school life or public affairs. Any number of stories in the news offer opportunities for writing editorials and short stories: desegregation, civil rights, discrimination, slum conditions, abuse of public office.

These six phases comprise a kind of unit which includes concept development, both intensive and extensive reading, and composition experience. If the concepts of the unit are fruitful, they will illuminate the various readings throughout the unit; and if the structure of the unit is effective, the student will learn to read and evaluate independently.